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HISTORIC SPOTS IN WISCONSIN

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VII. CERESCO, A PIONEER COMMUNIST SETTLEMENT

The story of the early settlement of Ceresco in Fond du Lac County must necessarily be a history of the Wisconsin Phalanx, that utopian and financially successful experiment in communism that was conceived in Southport (now Kenosha) in 1844 and carried into execution in the fertile region adjacent to the present city of Ripon. Ceresco was the original settlement. It was located in the valley on the western edge of Ripon City, which later began its existence on the neighboring hills, became a dangerous rival, and finally absorbed the earlier community.

From 1837 (the date of Fourier's death) to 1843 the country was profoundly stirred by discussion and agitation as to the merits of the coöperative and social system advocated by the eminent French economist, François Charles Fourier. He taught (among other things that were less creditable) that individual effort was a great economic waste as compared with concerted action. It was pointed out that the never-ending toil of the housewife could be greatly lessened by the simple expedient of a community kitchen and dining room, and that farm work could be made easier and more effective by combined effort.

This "science of new social relations," as it was called, was given wide publicity in this country by the New York *Tribune* and other periodicals of recognized standing, and the result was a newly-awakened and widespread interest. There was really nothing new in Fourier's system except that it was presented in a novel and attractive manner to a modern civilization. Several colonies had already been established in the United States when

in the autumn of 1843 some of the citizens of Southport, Wisconsin Territory, became deeply interested in the project. Discussions and debates continued through the winter, and in the spring of 1844 an organization was formed and articles of agreement were drawn up and signed under the name of the Wisconsin Phalanx. Stock was sold at \$25 a share and a considerable sum of money was raised in this way.

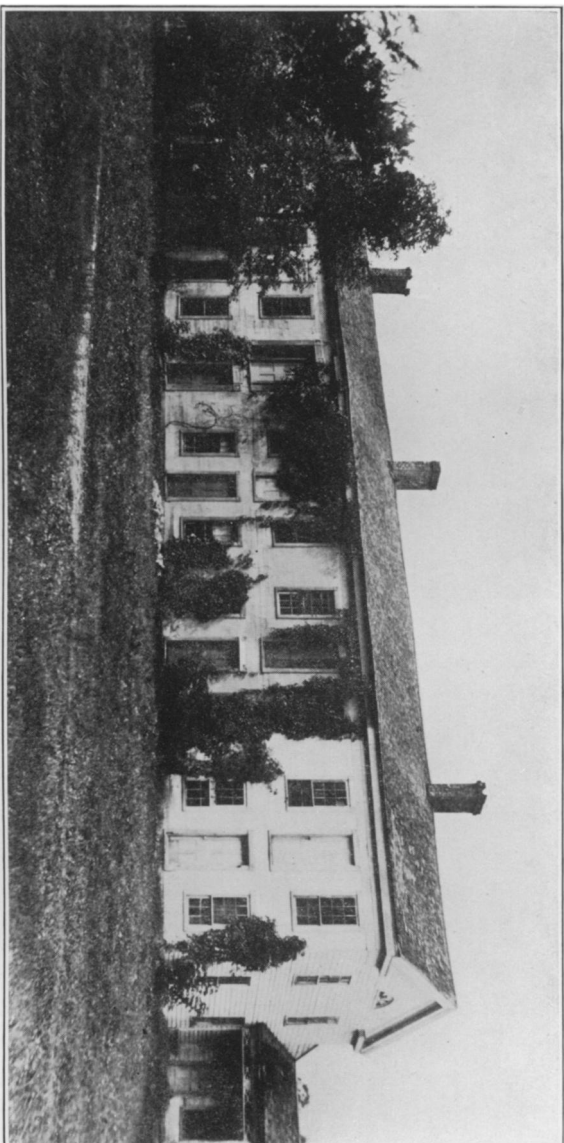
The next step was to find a suitable location for the colony, where government land could be purchased cheap. The officials secured the services of Ebenezer Childs, a prominent citizen of Green Bay, who had a good general knowledge of lands in the eastern part of Wisconsin Territory. Childs took with him three members of the newly-organized community, all good judges of land, and after spending almost two weeks in the wilderness and viewing a number of locations, they decided in favor of several hundred acres of land in a beautiful valley within what is now Ripon Township in Fond du Lac County. The land was purchased from the government through the Green Bay land office. On Sunday, May 27, 1844 nineteen men, the advance guard of the new community, reached the chosen location. They had driven through the forest from Southport with their horses and oxen in six days' time, camping by night along the trail. It is probable that no better men could have been found for the task they had chosen than were these nineteen men and the others that followed soon afterward. They were industrious and unafraid of hardship and had already accumulated considerable personal property, particularly livestock, before leaving their Southport homes. They were typical pioneers and eminently fitted to wrestle with the wilderness. These nineteen men who were willing to risk all in a community venture were: Alex. Todd, Jerome C. Cobb, Warren Chase, Jacob Beckwith, Nathan Hunter, John Limbert, T. V.

Newell, H. G. Martin, William E. Holbrook, Uriah Gould, Lester Rounds, Laban Stilwell, James Stuart, William Dunham, Joseph S. Tracy, Carlton Lane, George H. Stebbins, Seth R. Kellogg, and Chester Adkins. Ebenezer Childs joined the colony on June 4 and remained until September 24, when he returned to Green Bay. The original colonists brought with them thirty-four horses, eight yoke of oxen, and thirty-eight other cattle. As the spring was well advanced when they arrived, no time was lost in getting to work. Some of the men began immediately to dig cellars, for their first concern was to erect houses in which to shelter their families, who had been left in Southport and who were ready to follow as soon as the buildings were completed. Others of the men set to work to break up the sod of the open prairie, as it was necessary to get in crops without delay. Twenty acres were prepared and sown to grain or planted to vegetables the first season. Three houses were built as rapidly as possible, to take care of the women and children, and some of the families actually arrived before these first homes were ready for occupancy. As the weather was warm, rude shelter tents were used for a time. Each of these dwellings was twenty by thirty feet and divided into apartments so that several families were housed under one roof. These houses were later connected and extended and thus grew into the unique "Long House" of the community. Although food was prepared and served in common, the privacy of the family group was always respected by the Phalanx, and after meals each family retired to its own apartment. These buildings were all erected in Block 4 of what is now the City of Ripon. In the fall of 1844 one hundred acres of prairie were broken up and seeded to winter wheat; a sawmill was also built by the settlers, but it did not begin to turn out lumber until the following spring.

In the winter of 1845 a charter was obtained from the territorial legislature; the same was approved by Gov. N. P. Tallmadge on February 6, 1845. The "Long House" above mentioned first took on its characteristic form in 1845 and was one of the architectural freaks of this social laboratory. It continued to lengthen by additions until the building consisted of twenty apartments of twenty feet each, arranged in two rows with a long corridor between. Each apartment was distinctly separate from all others and yet all were under one roof. This is a unique feature in the description of a communist settlement of seventy-five years ago, but practically the same mode of living passes unnoticed today in our large cities where the dwellers in flat buildings and apartment houses repair daily to the restaurants for their meals.

The labor at Ceresco was all performed in common under the supervision of foremen who met every Saturday evening to make their report. Because of their adherence to Fourier's principle of self-determination and freedom of action, no person was compelled to work at any given time nor to labor more hours than he saw fit. His time was carefully kept by the foreman to whom he was assigned, and he received credit only for the hours when he actually worked. There was probably no desire among these hardy settlers to shirk or to take advantage of their fellows and thus the plan worked well. Evenings were given up to community gatherings, and the social life during the first few years of the experiment was very satisfactory. One evening of each week was set apart for debating and discussion, another evening for singing school, and still another for dancing and social gatherings.

Expense accounts were carefully kept and at the end of the year it was known exactly what it had cost to produce each field of grain or other crop. The cost of raising live stock was determined in the same way. Then one-



THE LONG HOUSE

This was the last and best building of the Phalanx. It was erected during the later years (1849 or 1850) and was therefore not the original Long House which was erected four or five years earlier.

fourth of the net increase was added to the capital and three-fourths distributed for labor in proportion to the number of hours that each member had worked. Skilled labor received some special consideration in the distribution of wages. At the close of 1845, about nineteen months after the establishment of the community, the second annual report was issued. It went into minute detail and showed a healthy financial condition. The capital had increased to \$27,775.22 and was unencumbered. It appeared that 102,760 hours of labor had been performed during the year, of which 21,170 hours had been expended in cooking or deducted for the board of members. The whole number of weeks' board charged to members was 4,234, and the cost of board per week was fixed at 44 cents in cash and five hours labor. This left 81,590 hours of labor to be paid for out of three fourths of the net profits, and the officers of the Phalanx fixed the wage for the year at $7\frac{1}{2}$ cents for each hour of common labor after board for the entire family had been deducted. The capital invested earned 12 per cent during the same year. While 1846 was a less prosperous year owing to a partial crop failure, still the organization was enabled to pay 5 cents per hour for labor, and 6 per cent on the capital. The population of the colony had increased to 180 by the close of 1846.

During 1847 the association earned net profits of \$9,029.73, and its property was appraised at \$32,564.18. The annual dividend amounted to $7\frac{3}{4}$ per cent and the wage paid to common labor was $7\frac{3}{16}$ cents per hour. For 1848 the dividend paid amounted to $6\frac{1}{4}$ per cent, and $6\frac{1}{4}$ cents per hour was paid for the labor. In 1849 there were signs of approaching disintegration, although it was still a paying proposition. The population had decreased to 120 due to dissatisfaction with the community restrictions. During this year $8\frac{1}{3}$ cents per hour was

paid for labor. There was never any dissatisfaction with the financial returns, but social conditions and business restrictions became irksome to many of the members. The seeds of dissolution had already been sown, and in April, 1850, the property was appraised and divided and the organization went out of existence. True to its financial record, the stock netted its owners a premium of 8 per cent when the affairs of the community were settled up.

The history of this experiment is an interesting one to the economist; but its failure as a communist settlement demonstrated the impossibility of keeping ambitious Americans within the limits of a restricted environment. Outside interests of the male members and a longing for less restricted social advantages on the part of the women and young people may be given as the reasons for the disintegration of the Wisconsin Phalanx. It is probable that more favorable conditions for the success of a communistic colony never existed. The members were of high character, stable, and industrious, and free from objectionable cults and practices. The location was an ideal one and the soil was highly productive. Today Ripon Township is one of the garden spots of Wisconsin, and the city of Ripon is known throughout the region for the high average of its citizenship. It has a prosperous college, and the noticeable atmosphere of a college city.